

‘The Nature and Mission of the Church’ (WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 198)

Response from the Uniting Church in Australia

‘The Uniting Church in Australia lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Uniting Church recognizes that it is related to other Churches in ways which give expression, however partially, to that unity in faith and mission.’¹

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) welcomes the Faith and Order Paper 198 ‘The Nature and Mission of the Church’ and offers the following comments in response to this Paper 198. We value the degree of consensus being sought in this text and we accept the challenge of seeking to discern the continual leading of the Holy Spirit as we seek to reconcile our ecclesial and other differences. Broadly speaking, we believe that this is a very helpful formulation of basic ecclesiological convictions which our church can wholeheartedly endorse, particularly when read in conjunction with the text, ‘Called to be the One Church’².

We find the formulations of points of continuing disagreement and division between (and within) churches to be mostly pertinent and helpful as a stimulus to seek an understanding of traditions and approaches other than our own. We also believe that this text does begin to reflect significant areas of convergence in ecclesiological understanding. So we would answer the first two questions posed within the Invitation in the affirmative. We believe that this study document does correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions and an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the church.

We begin our detailed response with comments on aspects of the text which reflect matters that are not currently addressed in it, or matters on which we see a need for further work. We then turn to detailed responses to the material which addresses ongoing disagreements.

In terms of what might be added to this text, we suggest that more emphasis could usefully be given to the theme of human freedom as an aspect of the gifts of God given through the Holy Spirit. Faithful response is a free response, both in the sense of freedom from the distorting power of sin and in the sense of an authentic and committed response from a person. The desire for freedom from certain forms of ecclesial authority has also been an important source of church division historically, leading to a need to discern the differences between the freedom which is the gift of God to each of us and the rebellious desire for autonomy which can ultimately turn us away from God. This theme of freedom could be discussed in sections 10, 11, 12 and/or 13, as well as in section 26 where the possibility of sin bears witness to this real freedom. While it is true that the Holy Spirit makes present to us the things of Christ and therefore enlivens and refreshes the traditional practices of our churches, a central aspect of this enlivening and refreshing is the gift of freedom to all church members. This theme of freedom is also connected to the role of the Eucharist in the work of God in ‘restoring human dignity’ (section 81).

¹ ‘The Basis of Union’ (BoU) 2. This is the foundation document of the Uniting Church in Australia. The numbers refer to sections (18 in all). The quotations in boxes in this response are all from the BoU, which shows the understanding and commitment of the UCA on certain matters at the time of union (22 June 1977).

² ‘Called to be the One Church’, WCC Assembly, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2006.

In addition to the ten issues of continuing disagreement discussed in this paper, we would name the tensions surrounding ethical issues as worthy of systematic reflection concerning their proper role and impact on our ecclesiological understanding. Many ethical differences relate to differences of culture and tradition rather than to fundamental questions of faith. Yet there are ethical matters such as sexual abuse by clergy which, when accompanied by systematic abuse of the power structures within a particular church and an equally systematic unwillingness to heal these wounds through prayer, pastoral conversation and amendment of life, are peculiarly damaging to faith. Even here, we believe that priority should properly be given to the honest confrontation of such issues by speaking the truth in love rather than by schism or secession. The purity of the church is maintained by the gracious action of God through Word and Sacrament, enabling humble courage for honest dealing. This gracious action is what leads into that unity of the church which is God's gift and will

Some sections of this paper would be clarified by expansion or by more attention to definitions. We would identify the following sections as specifically needing further work:

- section 13 (needing more positive expression of the paradoxical nature of the Church as both a divine and a human reality),
- sections 54-56 (needing more definition of the key terms 'holy', 'catholic' and 'apostolic'),
- section 62 (needing more articulation of the criteria for 'authentic diversity' and 'authentic unity'),
- section 98 (needing the addition of comment on the value of shared, collegial oversight of arrangements for ecclesial co-operation as well as shared witness and action in the world),
- sections 105-108 (needing some recognition of the pivotal character of a cultural revolt against authority in mainline western churches and the consequent need for rehabilitation of this theologically important theme),
- section 116 (which could helpfully address criteria for when ethical differences might be thought to be 'church-dividing').

We also note the important shift away from the goal of 'organic unity of the church' to that of a 'communion of local churches' (section 65). We see real value in working towards and within a communion of local churches (at whatever level of 'locality' this communion can be achieved).

As a Uniting church formed in response to the ideal of organic union, however, we believe that there is continuing positive value in the ideal of organic union which should not be discarded. We see ourselves as a church that has received from God the challenge as well as the gift of organic unity. We would acknowledge that our experience of union has revealed some limitations in the way in which organic union is sometimes understood and practiced. In particular, we acknowledge that organic unity is based upon the spiritual unity that is the gift of God; organizational and constitutional unity follow from this and cannot replace it.

The main challenges identified in this paper, however, come from the ten areas of continuing disagreement that are noted, which we discuss individually below. Historical divisions are largely maintained on the basis of these disagreements. In general, we welcome the clear statement of these issues as an opportunity to note how our own understanding is articulated and to see how far we can also welcome other views. We suggest that a clearer distinction should be made between judgements about church-dividing issues, where we are thinking of a church facing division (with inertia on the side of continuing unity) and judgements about the maintenance of present divisions (where inertia is on the side of continuing division). We believe that there are very few genuinely church-dividing issues, but all too many issues which

seem sufficient to justify continuing separation.

The Institutional Dimension of the Church and the Work of the Holy Spirit

‘The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church’s call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself. The Church lives between the time of Christ’s death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way to a promised goal; here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.’³

‘The Church as communion of believers is created by the Word of God, for it is through hearing the *proclamation of the gospel* that faith, by the action of His Holy Spirit, is awakened (Rom.10:17). Since the good news proclaimed to awaken faith is the good news handed down by the apostles, the Church created by it is *apostolic*. Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets the Church is God’s household, *a holy* temple in which the Holy Spirit lives and is active. By the power of the Holy Spirit believers grow into a holy temple in the Lord (Eph.2:21-22).’⁴

We note that the Church expresses its being in history in institutional and organizational forms, but that the source of its life is charismatic, depending upon the constant life-giving activity of the triune God. The Church is continually renewed by the mystery that, where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, Christ is there (Matthew 18:20). We would therefore, in response to (a), understand that the preaching and sacraments of the church are means used by the Holy Spirit through the divine Word to call, challenge and sustain believers. This does not negate the witness of Word and Sacrament to the direct action of the Holy Spirit on the hearts of believers. We see both as aspects of Christ’s feeding of the Church. We therefore see no ‘church-dividing’ potential here except where there might be a denial of the efficacy of Word and Sacrament as means of the action of the Holy Spirit.

In response to (b), we would stand with those who emphasize the fact that all believers remain subject to error and sin throughout life, so that the power and reliability of God’s truth is grounded in the active sovereignty of God’s Word and Spirit, working through, but also, if necessary, counter to the established institutional structures of the church. We recognize that this can lead to a hermeneutic of suspicion which itself runs the risk of crippling genuine movements of God’s Spirit in the life of the church and turning us away from a trusting reliance upon God. We therefore see the need to commit ourselves to processes of discernment of the will of God through prayer and through, for example, adopting consensus decision-making in meetings. We value our dialogue with those churches for whom episcopacy is a central part of their ecclesiology and believe that in our own denomination we need to recover a recognition of the authority conferred on the church by Christ and of the expression of this authority within the life and work of the church.

³ ³BoU3.

⁴ ‘Called to be the One Church’, Section 4, WCC Assembly, Porto Alegre, 2006.

Taking our stand upon the continuing work of God as the only secure basis for the faithfulness of the church, in response to (c), we are unable to affirm institutional continuity as a sufficient guarantee of the church's continuity in the apostolic faith, though we would affirm it as an indication and result of God's faithfulness to the church. We see none of these matters as themselves of church-dividing significance. We believe that convergence can be discerned in those areas where comparisons have revealed helpful analogies for the common task of preserving adherence to the apostolic faith.

Church as 'Sacrament'?

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in the two visible acts of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Christ himself acts in and through everything that the Church does in obedience to his commandment; it is Christ who by the gift of the Spirit confers forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and the actions promise; and it is Christ who awakens, purifies and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted."⁵

While the traditions from which the Uniting Church was formed do not speak of the church as itself 'a sacrament', for the reasons given, we note that the person of Christ can be properly seen as the great sacrament, leading to a recognition of the Church, as Christ's body, having a sacramental character. Differences in understanding concerning sacramentality can often seem to be 'division-confirming', but we believe that these differences should not be seen as church-dividing when the various uses of language are properly compared in terms of the sovereignty of Christ in and over the Church.

The Church and Sin

We would agree that 'the relationship between sin and holiness in the Church is not a relationship of two equal realities'⁶. For us, the church without sin is the church with God in the glory of heaven, which is not identical with the church struggling here on earth. While we believe that in God's purposes these churches are not two but one, we consider it misleading to conflate them in dealing with our present realities. In the Basis of Union, the UCA acknowledged that none of the churches coming into union had 'responded to God's love with a full obedience'.⁷ Seen in ordinary, human terms, the sinful actions of church leaders are normally spoken of as 'the sins of the church' because ecclesial power has been misused. We acknowledge the importance of a constant refreshing of the eschatological vision of the church in glory, as a challenge to all ungodliness in the life of the church here on earth. We therefore welcome the witness of those who refuse to affirm our all-too-human identification of the church with its present, struggling reality as if this was final. We do not see these differences as church-dividing (except possibly where they lead to a refusal to face the realities of present sin in the life of the church).

Limits of Diversity?

We have identified ourselves with those who 'understand the goal of visible communion as

⁵ BoU 6.

⁶ NMC, Box after section 56.

⁷ BoU 1.

beyond particular ecclesial or confessional identities⁸, which we have sought to practice in terms of our own organic union. More generally, however, we identify with those who say that ‘the One Church of Christ exists wherever the Gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are duly administered’⁹. We therefore see ‘reconciled diversity’¹⁰ as a most important proximate goal in the search for Christian unity. The limit that we see to acceptable diversity is given by departures from the faithful preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, though we acknowledge that this can lead to a wide variety of views about what is ‘right’ and ‘due’, with a consequent issue concerning authority for determining these matters in the life of the church. This issue names our struggle about identifying what is properly to be regarded as ‘church-dividing’. At this level of judgement concerning ecclesial faithfulness, we believe that the main damage to Christian unity comes from those whose self-definition excludes others without recognizing the priority of God’s judgement about who is or is not part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. We therefore believe that this topic challenges us to prayerful attempts to discern God’s judgement and a commitment to listen for the voice of Christ in what those who are not of our own church or party have to say.

Local Church

‘The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ.’¹¹

We understand the term ‘local church’ to refer to the local congregation as the manifestation in one place of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, though we also recognize the validity of the use of this phrase for regional forms of the church such as a diocese. We see a significant difference in the polities of our churches reflected in this different usage, but do not see these differences as church-dividing. Through dialogue, we have been challenged to recognize and reclaim the ecclesial character of our own regional councils and to affirm the continuing spiritual authority of these councils in interrelated partnership with congregations.

Baptism

‘The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates people into his body by Baptism. In this way Christ enables them to participate in his own baptism, which was accomplished once on behalf of all in his death and burial, and which was made available to all when, risen and ascended, he poured out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Baptism into Christ’s body initiates people into Christ’s life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit. The Uniting Church will baptize those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility.’¹²

‘Baptism bestows upon the churches both the freedom and the responsibility to journey towards common proclamation of the Word, confession of the one faith, celebration of one

⁸ NMC, Box after section 63.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ BoU 15.

¹² BoU 7.

eucharist, and full sharing in one ministry'.¹³ We have a mutual recognition of baptism with nine other churches in Australia based upon the practice of baptism with water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We understand baptism to be a sacrament which is the point of entry into the body of the church ('the body of Christ') for the baptized individual. We hear the concern of some churches about the need for a formed faith before a full Christian commitment can be made, but for us the predominant reality is the prevenient grace of God which is at work, for example, in the faith of the church and of the parents who bring their children for baptism. While the objectivity of our practice can be a help in times of personal doubt, we recognize the ongoing need for commitment to the path of Christian discipleship as personal faith matures and we acknowledge the serious responsibility for Christian nurture (which is also promised in the Basis of Union).

While we do not see differences concerning the practice and understanding of baptism as necessarily church-dividing, we do recognize the importance of comparability in our processes for Christian discipleship when churches seek mutual recognition as churches. We fully concur with the judgement expressed in 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry': 'The need to recover baptismal unity is at the heart of the ecumenical task as it is central for the realization of genuine partnership within the Christian communities'.¹⁴

Eucharist

'The Uniting Church acknowledges that the continuing presence of Christ with his people is signified and sealed by Christ in the Lord's Supper or the Holy Communion, constantly repeated in the life of the Church. In this sacrament of his broken body and outpoured blood the risen Lord feeds his baptized people on their way to the final inheritance of the Kingdom. Thus the people of God, through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, have communion with their Saviour, make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, proclaim the Lord's death, grow together into Christ, are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which Christ will bring to consummation.'¹⁵

'The Eucharist is essentially the sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian receives this gift of salvation through communion in the body and blood of Christ. In the Eucharistic meal, in the eating and drinking of the bread and wine, Christ grants communion with himself. God himself acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member. In accordance with Christ's promise, each baptized member of the body of Christ receives in the Eucharist the assurance of the forgiveness of sins (Matt.26:28) and the pledge of eternal life (John 6:51-58).'¹⁶

The UCA understands the Eucharist to be a sacrament in which the Lord feeds his people with his own body and blood, a symbolic but also real event which restores the unity of Christ's body where it is broken and strengthens it for loving communion and service. It is a representation – re-presentation - of the death of Christ which is the effective sacrifice, leading to our thanksgiving. So we do not accept the need to identify the Eucharist solely with feeding or with

¹³ 'Called to be the One Church, section 8. This section goes on to acknowledge: 'There are some who do not observe the rite of baptism in water but share in the spiritual experience of life in Christ'.

¹⁴ 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' (BEM), WCC Faith and Order, 1982, (Commentary 6).

¹⁵ BoU 8.

¹⁶ BEM, Eucharist 2.

re-presentation or with thanksgiving. We understand the presence of the Risen Christ to be a real event. For us, the invocation of the Holy Spirit acknowledges the action of God in this sacrament. For the UCA, 'the Lord's Table is open to all members of the Uniting Church and to all persons who in any fellowship of Christ's people may receive Holy Communion in that fellowship'¹⁷. The statement in this box of continuing points of difference and the call for renewed dialogue on these points seems to us to be a good summary of our present divisions and confusion.

Ordained Ministry

"The Uniting Church from inception, will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to recognise among its members women and men called of God to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock, to share in government and to serve those in need in the world."¹⁸

We understand ordained ministry to be the church's ordering response to the call of God in the lives of certain individual church members. The office and role of the ordained is therefore a gift of God to the church for the maintenance and the fruitfulness of the apostolic faith. We do not see ordination as a sacrament, though we do understand it as being for the whole church, not simply a local arrangement in our branch of the church. We understand that women as well as men are being called by Christ into the ordained ministry of the church.

For us, the ordained ministry has a special responsibility for the maintenance of the apostolic faith in the life of the church, but we also see that the primary locus for the maintenance of the apostolic faith is the whole life of the church in the world and in this sense it is the responsibility of all Christians. We do not accept that the church is constituted by ordination, but neither do we accept that ordination is simply the creation of the church. Both have their origin in the calling and the gifting of God. We therefore exercise a hermeneutic of suspicion with respect to clerical domination, but also to lay domination in the life of the church, on the basis that Christ is the Lord and Head of the Church.

We accept the eucharistic presidency of the ordained as normative, though we acknowledge the possibility of exceptional arrangements to meet pastoral difficulties. Uniting Church presbyteries are able to commission and train lay people for this role in specified circumstances, though this is a matter that is still under ongoing consideration.

The Uniting Church does not conform its pattern of ordained ministry to the 'threefold pattern of ministry identified in 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' (WCC, Faith and Order, 1982), as we ordain to the Ministry of the Word and the Ministry of Deacon (understood as different but equal) and we do not ordain bishops. While we would affirm that there is continuity for our church in apostolic succession through historical continuity both of the church (with all the separations and disruptions that are in this history) and of the ordained ministry, we would not look to this continuity for the truth of our ecclesial being, but rather to the action of God who brings the dead to life and justifies the ungodly. We do not see any of the above issues as finally church-dividing, though we recognize that there is much here which is church-separating.

Episkope, Bishops and Apostolic Succession

¹⁷ Basis of Union, 1971, Appendix 2 (iv). The Appendices to the Basis of Union, while not a part of the Basis, were approved by the First Assembly of the UCA. It is also worth noting that, for the UCA, baptized children may be admitted to Holy Communion (1985 Assembly Minute.85.109.02)

¹⁸ BoU 14.

Historically, we stand with those who see no special reason for privileging episcopal structure based upon personal episcopacy (and significant numbers of our people would consider personal episcopacy better avoided). We have, however, benefited from our dialogue with episcopal churches in our own self-understanding about our exercise of pastoral oversight of congregations and ministers, which we understand to be episcopal in nature.

We exercise a collegial and collective form of *episkope* through our conciliar structures (presbyteries, synods and assembly). We acknowledge that we are on the way to recognizing valuable aspects of the episcopal ordering of church life in episcopal churches. We should also acknowledge that we would be helped to exercise our own forms of *episkope* more responsibly if we were to become more overtly supported by the recognition from the bishops of our ecumenical partner churches of the spiritual seriousness of our commitment to *episkope* through our councils in the name of Christ. We see apostolic succession as primarily the continuity of the whole Church in the faith of the apostles, but we also accept that episcopal ministry can be a sign to the whole Church of its continuity in that faith.

We should mention the need for discussion of re-ordination, a practice which we find objectionable. We understand that episcopal churches believe that ordination needs to be by a bishop. We regard this as a point of pivotal significance which requires more detailed ecumenical discussion. We do not re-ordain ministers coming to us from another tradition where we discern that ordination has taken place. We do ordain where we do not believe that ordination has taken place, though this can be an ambiguous and contested matter. We do not see these matters as ultimately church-dividing, though they are powerfully church-separating.

Conciliarity and Universal Primacy

We stand with those who are not persuaded of the necessity for a universal ministry of primacy. We affirm the value of the role played by the World Council of Churches in promoting global dialogue between churches and of the experience of a degree of Christian unity that derives from this assembled fellowship of churches. We have come to recognize the potential value of the papal role as a global focus of unity which can serve Christian mission, noting the special attention the Pope can command from the world media when there is a word to deliver. We agree that this matter is at an early stage of discussion. This matter has historically been caught up in the major divisions of the church and the long shadow of this history is still powerfully present among us today. We would regard this as potentially resolvable if the positive spiritual dimensions of the papal office can crowd out the administrative exercises of ecclesial power which seem inseparable from the papal role.

In conclusion, we affirm the hope expressed in the subheading of this paper, that these formulations are a stage on the way to a common statement of a genuinely shared ecclesiology. We offer our willingness as a church to continue this conversation in the hope of arriving at that point, in God's good time.